
A Guilty Woman

ONE day in midsummer Evelyn Crowe, the murderess, left the state penitentiary. It was very simple: she slipped out by a small private door with the warden, who took her to the train in his car.

She had been sentenced to nineteen years at the age of thirty-nine, and had served six. Once she had been a prominent teacher and sociologist, and the director of a settlement house in a large city. Consequently, in the prison, she had been made matron of the factory in which female convicts sewed overalls, and later a sort of secretary to the warden. In the latter position she had enjoyed great confidence and might have been privileged to run errands in the town occasionally; but for her own peace of mind, she had preferred

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not to keep alive her sense of the world outside the walls.

Eventually she had heard that the women's clubs had sponsored a movement for her release, making capital of the fact that her lungs were infected with tuberculosis. Petitions had already been rejected by one governor, but his successor might have a more merciful disposition or political reasons to show clemency. . . . Evelyn Crowe had put aside these insubstantial hopes irritably, because they undid her stoicism. Nevertheless, in the warden's office, she had studied the candidates' faces: a pendulous, lucky face, another pulled this way and that, with a mouth like the seam left by an operation.

One day the warden had sent for her, and with as many divagations, as much shortness of breath and flushing as if he were asking for her hand in marriage, announced that she had been pardoned.

Free and out of doors, she was astonished by the mediocrity of her feelings. There

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was the immortal blue sunlight, the seedy trees in line against the brick walls, as vivid on the outside as they were leaden within, and beyond them the flimsy residences, the lawns rich with hammocks, washing, pigeons, children at play. The sight of these things did not quite penetrate her heart. For within herself as well as behind her in the prison all was still iron and cement, still hollow, everything in its logical cell, silent but for a buzz of machinery, immaculate as a hospital, organized as perfectly as heaven or hell. She did not shrink or weep, which also meant that she was strong in spite of her lungs.

On the way to the station the warden made a mournful face. He had been proud to have so remarkable a woman among his charges; she had been a perfect secretary. Nevertheless, he had lost all joy in his work while she had been there. He also was a prisoner, not by transgression, but by vocation, a prisoner of the instincts which fitted him for the high position he held. Into this spiritual confine-

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ment she had seemed to introduce tormenting sentiments of the free world—pity, scruples, fortitude. He had a habit of saying that he meant to lighten as much as possible the tragic destinies of which he was master; whenever, for example, he had thought of some new and ostensibly beneficent ruling in which lay hidden merely a desire to exercise power or even to cause distress, she had reminded him of his words. So she had robbed him of some of his vigor by robbing his duties of their perversity, and in other ways as well.

While he bought her ticket she stood in the waiting room, the only one in the state, she thought, in which handcuffed travellers were common, from which the worn-out and liberated like herself departed to begin something or another, offence or expiation, all over again. There was a large mirror under the clock. She took off the ill-fitting hat and blue veil which her friend Martha Colvin had sent in honor of the occasion. It was an unattractive old creature she saw; the

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small penitentiary glasses had not given back any such woeful image, for she had been handsomer and fresher than the other convicts, though by no means the youngest. Her iron-gray hair seemed to have died there, of hasty combing and bad soap and lack of sunlight; it resembled a cheap wig. The skin sagged at her temples and along the jawbones; it was knotted up, on the other hand, around her brilliant eyes, her thick mouth wasted away, her very large nose. Well, she was an old woman; in a way she was glad; nothing more could happen to her; life would be comparatively easy.

The train whistled. She and the warden went out on the platform. It stopped at the junction and whistled again. The warden hurried back to the waiting room and looked inside. "Will you kindly step this way a minute, Miss Crowe?" It was second nature to obey his peremptory voice. Inside the door he pulled her about by the shoulders and kissed her. She might have laughed or cried

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or both if the train had not been there to hurry her away.

She found an empty seat in the car and wrapped the blue veil about her face, expecting to be recognized. Once her picture had been in all the papers day after day for weeks. She remembered having happened to see, on her way to prison, the gaunt and blotted face crowned with headlines rolled over and over and torn by the wind in an alley. Just having looked at herself in the glass, she realized that those blurred half-tones were better likenesses now than when they had been made. But of course no one even wondered who she was, who six years before she had been.

So life would be comparatively easy, but thanks less to the short memory of men than to Martha Colvin. They had gone to school together, and Mrs. Colvin had been a widow for fifteen years; she lived alone outside Brussels, Wisconsin, and made a good living by farming. Upon the news of the crime she had hurried to Belleville to keep her friend

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company during the trial, and upon the news of the pardon had invited her to her house.

One could not get to Brussels by railroad except through Belleville. She changed trains at Milwaukee, and as she drew near the scene of the disaster station by station, her heart grew heavier and looser until it felt, inside her shirtwaist, like a sponge. She put back her veil so that she could see clearly.

Hills looking down at the train, in groups reclining against each other; cattle in flocks lifting their noses out of the grass to look; groves in which they had gathered chestnuts, as a pretext; roads raced over by a certain phantom automobile—oh, now the driver was dead. . . . The brakeman came and went, crying "Belleville" through the car.

It was there that as an untroubled spinster she had come to teach history in the high school while she wrote her book, *The Unmarried Woman Worker*. She searched for the house she had lived in, unsuccessfully; had she forgotten which one it was? She

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moved to a seat on the station side of the train. Red clapboards, a scale for weighing wagons, cinders on the planks, taxis pale with dust drawn up, small factories and grain elevators, the click of the telegraph, and a slight moist noise somewhere of welcoming or parting kisses. "All aboard..." The train crept away.

She had hoped to see a familiar face, however painfully familiar—not a one. A Civil War veteran with a series of little dishevelled beards and withdrawn, weeping eyes, looking, looking, not seeming to see much. She would like to have had a glimpse of one of her pupils, a boy named Philip who had sent her magazines and several books while she had been in prison. Getting sick at his stomach in his father's harvest field when the newspaper with her name in large letters had arrived—so she had thought of him ever since; it had been midsummer, a day as hot as this. At that time he had been the chum of the nephew of the man she had killed.

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Captain Fisher—unworthy, unlucky man. Bill . . .

A woman sat down beside her and remodelled her mouth with a stick of rouge. Someone had given her rings, which had settled well into her plump fingers. The sort of woman he had preferred, she thought, perhaps one of the very ones. Her lawyer had offered in her defence proof of his immorality, most of it new to her; and had complained afterward of her cynical expression during this part of the testimony, which, he said, prejudiced the jury against her. Now she regarded humbly and even with admiration this woman, fleshy and at ease, who had known how to keep young, and wished she could begin a conversation.

To the left the courthouse steeple rose like a weapon toward the cool, round clouds. There she had been tried. Extra editions of the newspapers had been sold on the lawn for those who had not been able to get into the courtroom. The steps had been crowded

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with reporters and women, women with mouths made firm by appeased love, successful jealousy, with fortunate bodies filled out by child-bearing.

The train got up speed; a hill had covered the steeple. Now both crime and punishment were behind her; little that meant. The young woman at her side licked the rouge off her lips and fell asleep. It took three hours more to get to Brussels.

There was Martha Colvin waiting beside a little automobile. She held Evelyn by the shoulders and studied her appearance. "You are not old," she said.

Evelyn knew that she was never going to be able to express her gratitude toward this impassive creature with strong, freckled hands, red-mouthed and sallow, in an untrimmed felt hat and a baggy suit.

They passed between fields of straw which made of the dusk something yellow and animated like candle-light. Indifferent to them, but struggling against wave after wave of

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other emotion and of weariness, Evelyn described leaving the penitentiary: the formalities and the good-byes; and how the warden's man of all work, a simple-minded negro serving time for rape, left alone with her in the office for a moment, had sung several bars of a spiritual, his loose joints keeping time—"Oh some o' these mornin's bright and fair-air-air, I'm g'wan to lay down this weary load"—running out into the long corridors when the warden returned; and how she had seen no one whom she knew on her way through Belleville; and even how the warden had kissed her in the waiting room.

Upon hearing the last anecdote Martha's face darkened, as if her friend's troubles were beginning all over again. Evelyn did not know how to explain that she could not be susceptible to love anew, that she was safe. They decided upon a pseudonym and a false identity, lest the hired girl spread the news of her arrival about the neighborhood.

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Martha's was a wooden house with piazzas and a lean-to summer kitchen, a grape-arbor and a stone creamery, under a pair of elms like two big shrouded harps. In the yard there were fine poultry and a sleeping cat, and hollyhocks with dry leaves and cheap-looking flowers, red and rose. Martha took her up to the spare bedroom and said, "Make yourself at home."

Any private dwelling would have seemed like a wooden snail-shell. Evelyn was afraid of the great Wisconsin thunder-storms, no longer shut outside quadruple walls, and for a long time could not sleep because of the sounds that there are in nights of liberty.

Martha said: "Now don't you worry about a thing. What I've got is yours as long as you need it. I hope something will turn up after a while, because we might get on each other's nerves—we should be a sorry couple of mean old widows, sitting here trying to outlive each other."

"I can never repay you. Anyway, who

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am I to think of such a thing? There was a time when I devoted my life to others—or thought I did. Now I'll just have to say thank you, and do nothing else in return." She was kept from weeping by the fact that it would have embarrassed Martha.

"Well, that doesn't matter in the least. But you ought to do something some day; for yourself alone, not in return. Something that will take a lot of energy and be of great interest. Your life is not over; it's not enough—to do wrong and be punished and get out and then to sit around and think back."

"You'd be surprised to know how little I think."

"So much the better."

Evelyn had never known anyone in Brussels and was still too timid to meet strangers. In fact, she did not want to do anything. It seemed enough—to make friends with the country, the storms, the domestic animals. She had forgotten them, and they did not reflect upon her exceptional evil life as

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human beings would have done. The rain falling upon the just and the unjust alike . . . She had indoor habits; needless to say there had not been a comfortable chair in the prison.

She went to see a doctor in Milwaukee, who told her that her lungs had begun to heal in the prison and would give her no more trouble if she led a quiet life; tuberculosis had been only an internal scar of the bullet which, between five and ten minutes after her crime, she had directed against herself, which had torn away half of one breast and a fingertip.

The days were long in idleness. Every week or two Martha, accompanied by a man named Bolton who was her dearest friend, went hunting or fishing, according to season. The house was full of firearms. One morning Martha said: "Wouldn't you like to come with us? It seems to me you used to be a good shot. Didn't some doctor once tell you to do it for your nerves?" Then she realized

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her blunder, turned scarlet, left the room, came back immediately. "Dear, my dear. What nonsense I talk! Please excuse me."

"Thank you for forgetting," Evelyn said.

The two women lived alone, without guests, for several months. At last John Bolton came to supper. He was an old bachelor doctor who owned some property in the town and had virtually given up his practice. Before Evelyn had come there to live, he had been in the habit of spending the evening with Martha at least every time they went hunting together. Therefore, uncertain whether or not she herself welcomed the distraction, she was happy about it for Martha's sake.

Martha introduced them. There followed an extremely nervous silence, from which Evelyn gathered that he knew who and what she was. They sat down to supper. Martha tried to talk about their last hunting, about the crops; the doctor seemed unable to pay attention. Evelyn determined that they were

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not going to spend the whole evening in this way. So she said: "I have been hungry for six years. Penitentiary cooks, as you may imagine, are not the best in the world. Everything tastes so good. . . ."

The doctor felt obliged to smile, cheerlessly.

With desperate patience Evelyn told what they had had to eat, and then continued about the prisoners and the prison, speaking as if she loved them above all other people, other places. With desperate patience, in which panic rose between every two sentences, hard to put down. . . . If she had to stop, she thought, she would have to leave the room. The doctor resembled some one, the warden perhaps—perhaps because they were the only two men she had talked to in years. Suddenly she began to recover some of the joy of her lectures, her classes, her life as it ought to have been; two pupils, one of them hostile, the other tongue-tied with anxiety and compassion. . . .

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Little by little the man's face relented; it grew less handsome and more like Martha's. He stopped holding himself away from the back of his chair. He began to eat heartily. He asked questions. Martha's eyes reddened; she smiled at them both as if it were she who had reason to be grateful. From the prison they turned to other subjects. There were two or three minutes at a time when Evelyn forgot that she had ever been a prisoner. The clock struck twelve before he thought of going home.

The next day Martha went to town, and Evelyn was restless. She had read and reread all the books in the house; she could not learn to enjoy sewing. She remembered Martha's having said that she would find a pile of old magazines in a certain clothes-closet. There they were, over Martha's half-dozen man-nish dresses; large popular monthlies with rose-petal girls on the covers... Hall Caine, Phillips, new names—she smiled in anticipation, thinking how bad literature

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x { justifies itself by treating more important matters than good writers have the courage to touch upon: violent sentiments, adultery, ostracism, guilt, and redemption. She carried the dusty piles to a rug in the middle of the floor, sat down among them, began to turn over the pages.

One magazine was fat with a package of clippings, and opened of its own accord; the package fell out. It was the newspaper record of her crime and trial. What she felt was her idle smile hardening into a mere twist of flesh against her teeth. Shabby, yellow, carefully dated pages. . . . All during the trial she had wanted to be able to observe how it was going, how much of the inner truth was made clear—but as in a dream her mind had seemed to be floating, slow, cold, extraneous, and to understand any given moment she would have had to stop it in its flight, to give her attention time to thaw out. Now she was going to know everything, whether she wanted to or not.

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There were the photographs of herself which had become good likenesses long afterward, in weird hats of that time. Photographs of her father, now dead, whom Martha had persuaded not to visit her in the jail. The settlement house, so discredited by her connection with it that soon after it had had to close its doors. The house in which she had lived in Belleville—it looked like a pile of match-boxes with a turret. The staircase and the hall with a large X printed on the carpet. Captain Fisher, Bill. . .

That carpet had been red with intertwined violet flowers. There he had lain, in a shirt changing color, a coat getting wet; large, blond, abominable. And loved. Less loved then than at any other time; it was her love that she had killed, too violently, too late, and he had died only by accident, died because, having good luck with love, he had bad luck with everything else—he had always said so.

Having told him a new reason for them to

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get married, having listened for she did not know how long to laughing abuse, she scarcely knew what—she had bounded up the stairs to a certain bureau drawer, driven by something beside anger, and darted down again, agile, senseless, her entire outstretched arm one weapon, stiff and tipped by the pistol. Then she had not looked at him but had telephoned the superintendent of schools to come at once. There had been two more bullets in the pistol—not enough. Shooting herself had been a means of getting the body out of her sight, the body abominable for two reasons: because it was good-looking, brutal, and frivolous (his fault), because it did not rise out of the dark pool in front of the door (her fault). The superintendent of schools had found her sitting on the stairs with the pistol pointed at him, a spot on her shirtwaist, waiting, then growing tired of waiting, ordering him to look the other way, firing again, hurting her hand, missing again, fainting.

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All this, she saw, had been in the newspapers; testimonial proof of it, comment, and illustrations. Her heart was like a churn; she was breathing out loud. It was not her guilt which she minded, guilt without premeditation; but for a doctor's advice she would never have possessed a pistol or any other weapon; a day's delirium, unpardonable—but after all, she had not been pardoned, not for six years. Unfortunately there was something more in the papers.

There were her love-letters. They had been printed serially, word for word. They were genuine; she remembered having written them; she had never seen them. Where had she been when they had been read in court? She heard, as clearly as if someone were standing beside her, over her, a famous man saying in an active dry voice like a grass-hopper's, years before that, "You have remarkable literary talent, Miss Crowe, Miss Crowe, Miss. . . ." She believed that if she had ever seen those letters she would

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have choked herself to death in the jail with her own hands, half a finger missing from the left hand. "Does he long for his teeny-weeny"; love-nest and sick craving and bedtime; "Oh, how I miss you . . ." She had called him daddy, sugar, big bear; she had spelled out baby-talk; crosses for kisses.

She began to cry, but it was only a sort of rustling in what was left of her breasts, something like a fist clenched and pressing upon her tongue. She had forgiven the man; this was merely being unable to forgive herself what they had had in common, she told herself—but it did not help. What they had had in common was vulgarity. After years of waiting, in haste to be corrupted, how womanly; purity preserved until the day after her thirty-eighth birthday; a woman of a certain age; the age of reason; when love brings drunkenness . . .

The crime had taken ten minutes; these letters stood for more than a year.

"I just thought I'd try old maid's love—

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see what *that* was like," he had said, just before the end. What it was like . . . Misspelled, indecent, idiotic. "Old maid's love, old maid's love," she cried aloud. She pressed her face against the pages of the magazines, tore at the rug with her nails. Everyone she would ever know had read those letters.

Having come thus far in her thought, she made another discovery. Her mind seemed to open; it was like pages opening of their own accord; love fell into sight. If she went on seeing John Bolton . . .

In her imagination shaken by sobs, dusky with tears, the doctor's face took on all the moving aspects of other faces, the dead man's beauty, the warden's authority; it even borrowed kindness from Martha's. Face flowering in her exhaustion . . . Suddenly the wild dream put her to sleep, and she lay, with her head on the magazines—in which, like any other reader but more than any other, she had found the history of her life, past and

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future—until it was dark, until Martha, sounding her horn in the lane, came home.

Evelyn sprang to her feet, put back the clippings and the magazines, threw herself on the bed to leave a hollow in it, and went downstairs to tell Martha that she had been taking a nap. If Martha learned what she had seen, what had happened, she would not forgive herself for having kept the clippings lying loosely about. Never, she must never, never by a slip of the tongue. . . . Perhaps that was the only thing she would ever have a chance to do out of gratitude.

For two or three weeks keeping the secret was not easy. Thus far she had been saved from shameful, even from regretful, introspection by the hardness of prison life and by the fact that, since nineteen years was a life-sentence, nothing mattered, and lately by the shock of freedom. Now, a free woman but falling in love, she had to look at all her conduct clearly; love was a cruel brilliant light within herself, upon herself, focussed

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as if by a magnifying glass, burning, fiber by fiber. A personal, portable hell . . .

She pretended to be merely ill. Martha studied her, suspicious of vague sicknesses, and advised her to consult Dr. Bolton. All day long her rough-looking lips were restless with questions. Evelyn, yearning for a confidant, was afraid of them; at the first deft inquiry all the anguish might come out, with the least word she would be doing harm again—she had done enough. She discovered that by not trying to deny to herself her desire to talk to Martha, and putting it off from hour to hour, she could accomplish her end, and by hiding her newly awakened shame, little by little lost sight of it herself.

But she determined not to see the doctor again. The next time he came she stayed in her room. Martha said: "John thinks you don't like him. I don't see how you can help it—he is nearly perfect. Anyway, I didn't notice that you didn't, the other night."

"Oh, but I do, very much. Quite the con-

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trary, I thought he didn't like me. A woman who has shot somebody must be prepared for that."

"Stop saying such things, I tell you," Martha answered, sharply. "I don't know what has possessed you the last few weeks."

So Evelyn persuaded herself that it was Martha who persuaded her to see the doctor. Old and hopeless though she was, the autumn after the first frost, the Indian summer, was like a rustic heaven—the part of heaven in which not all desires have been fulfilled—the forests blushing and rusting, all the hours full of hesitation, of waiting, of hope. John Bolton came often, and at last often when Martha was not there.

He said: "I like you because you can change. You grew old, and now the last few weeks you have been growing younger. You have been a foolish woman and at other times you are wise. I suppose you had strong feelings but sometimes I wonder if you aren't cold all the way through—you think all the

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time. Then sometimes I notice the fiery way you speak. Perhaps that is because you were a teacher. Or perhaps because you were shut up there so long with only your ideas to see—you do talk of your ideas as if they were people. Now Martha and I have been the same every day for about thirty years.”

She said: “I changed too much, one day, in a few minutes. Coming from the prison, as I passed through Belleville—that was where I—that was where it, happened—I looked up and down the station platform, to see if there was anyone I remembered. There was nobody but an old soldier with whiskers. He was looking up and down the platform. His eyes were rather murky. I think I am like him in a way—he must have lost the past by losing his memory, at least the memory of what made him do what he did and he was looking for a future to take its place, to fill the vacancy. No one spoke to him.”

“Oh no,” he said, “they took you away to prison just at the age when women get old.

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Your hair is grayer than mine or Martha's, but you seem to me the youngest."

She said: "I am as good for nothing as if I were old. Martha wants me to get back my ambitions, my ideals. Indeed, I don't want to be dependent on her always. But the fact is I feel as if I should never want to lift a hand again as long as I live. You see, modern prisons are arranged for people who commit crime for profit, and out of laziness and cowardice. If hard labor gets to be a habit for them, maybe they will have the patience to earn a living honestly when they get out. This system made me lazy and a coward. For I feel that I did my share under lock and key, I mean of hard work—and I don't know what else but physical labor I should be allowed to do now. Don't forget that in the old days I was paid a salary for my character, my high moral standing. You can imagine how little there is left of that."

"More than you think. There is some kind of superiority about everything you say,

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everything you do, your eyes looking straight at people, the way you lift your hands without touching anything. You are different."

She said: "I may seem to be, but I haven't been. I know. Because, not long ago, I saw some letters I wrote. As you see, I lose my voice when I try to speak of them. Sometimes I think I mind because they make me like everybody else, because I was proud of the exceptional aspects of my life, because pride is my besetting sin. Sometimes now I decide it would have been better if I had been, from the beginning, more like those letters, like other people, a little vulgar all the time instead of holding it back. Waiting, oh, complacently, for the dam to burst. Disastrous old maid. . . ."

"Don't ——" he said. "You know, you haven't been living in Wisconsin in late years, not right out in it. Or else you'd have more pride, by contrast. You can't imagine how stagnant we all get. We use the most miserable language and so we can't under-

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stand each other. But we are all alike just the same. We are all so countrified and disappointed, although everything succeeds. You must have travelled a lot when you were young. When we get to my age and have plenty of money, we'd go away, but we don't know where to go. . . ."

One night they were playing pinochle. Martha had gone to bed. The house cat sat purring on Evelyn's lap; in their hands the cards whispered; they were tired of talking. The out of doors, brought close to them by an uncurtained window, was bluish and cold. She shuffled and dealt. Suddenly John dropped his cards and took her wrists in his hands; her cards fell in disorder; how tired they were of playing!

The table was covered with a piece of buckskin, an entire hide with a bullet-hole under her elbow. The cards were pretty under the warm lamp. The ace of spades, Carmen's death—her sad old eyes hunted for it and failed to find it; without meaning to,

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he had covered it up. *A dark man will come into your life. I see a long voyage...*

These were the rulers over this world, the powers: different denominations of power, spotted red and black, shuffled and thrown down under clasped hands; the calm red-yellow busts, bedizened, not smiling, each one with two faces, always right side up, always wrong side up—it did not matter which. She could not think of anything but what she saw, and resolved to have, all her life, a pack of cards spread out where she could see them.

He held her hands for a long time in silence. Then he said, "Evelyn, wouldn't you like to marry me?"

Martha's cat sprang to the floor as she stood up. For no reason they hurried over to the window. He said: "We are both lonely. I can take better care of you than Martha can. I am fifty, you are almost as old. We'll go away. You'll be happier."

"Don't tell me reasons," she interrupted.

"Please. Please, Evelyn."

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"Oh, oh, did you think I wouldn't?" she cried. "What am I ——"

They had come across the room to the window, that is, to the one-sided, scarred wintry moon. It gazed at her for a long time like some soiled omnipotent face, now weakened by her weeping, now flashing with her emotion, now hidden by John's face . . .

"Will you leave me now?" she asked finally. "I can't understand, with you near, how all is changed."

"You tell Martha," he said. She loved him the more for not being courageous at that moment. He went home, yielding her to her joy.

Her own courage was scarcely sufficient the next afternoon, though she was not aware of all they were doing to their friend. John was not coming until night. She and Martha sat together, well bundled up, in a patch of late-November sunshine, under the stripped arbor. "Martha, I love John. He has asked me to marry him."

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Martha wept. She wrung her gloved hands and covered her face with them both.

All the one's hope being flooded away in the flood of the other's tears, all her joy crumpling up . . . "Then," Evelyn muttered, "you yourself, you too——"

"Don't mind me. It's all right. It's wonderful. You won't stay here, will you? It will be all right."

Evelyn spoke sternly. "First, tell me if you love him. You *have* loved him, all the time."

"Oh, of course I loved him. Who could help it? Fifteen years. . . ."

Evelyn said: "Then I won't. I can't. It's very simple. I will go away. You shouldn't have let it happen. If I weren't too old I'd take my miserable life now. Please, please forgive me now, Martha. And help me to get away soon."

"Nothing of the sort. You're going to marry John. That's that. And say no more

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about it. And you're going to live happily ever after."

"How odious! Wicked I've been, never as wicked as that. You came to my rescue twice. Oh, my shame! . . . Compare me with yourself. The murderess turned thief——"

"Stop! Evelyn, stop at once!"

They sat for a moment gazing at each other like strangers.

"Now I must explain," Martha began again, "why I've been kind, since that worries you. The misery of other people makes me miserable. I do what I can to stop it—for my own sake. That's all. I've had good luck, within limits. Because I've been prudent. Well, I hate prudence. But if I manage to do something for others, you, for instance—why, I don't have to be ashamed of myself. Pride is my besetting sin. That you must understand, that I am a thoroughly selfish woman."

Evelyn was thinking: two kinds of selfish-

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ness, Martha's and her own; Martha's was not likely to be rewarded on this earth. As for herself, she did harm unintentionally—but thoroughly—and when it was over, aroused sympathy and secured help. Which meant that her disastrous emotions were not so foolish as they seemed. She made use of them, as of a kind of unconscious cunning, to get her own way. She was the more feminine of the two; therefore hers was the winning side, the winning side. Nothing succeeds like success—odious. “No, no, no, no! This one thing I can't, won't do . . .”

Martha paid no attention to her. “Now about John. You know, at first he wouldn't come to see you. On account of—oh, well, you can imagine. I made him come. In order not to have to respect him less. Then it occurred to me that this might happen; I thought of what you told me about the warden. That's why I left you alone together—you see I always have my reasons—in order not to have to reproach myself for the

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jealousy I did feel. I hoped you were both too old to think of marrying, and then we'd stay here together, all three of us. Now of course you will travel. I always thought you should go abroad where even you couldn't expect anyone to remember the past. I thought of lending you money to go but, I couldn't afford to; the crops have been poor for several years and pork isn't worth anything any more ——"

"I can't sit here and listen to you talk like this," Evelyn cried. "You are proving how much better you are than I am. Oh, better, better, I should think so—and you can't keep from making me feel it. You might have spared me that. I am ashamed enough. I can't endure it. Stop it for the love of God!"

"Evelyn," her friend said quietly, "we are too old to quarrel about a man."

Evelyn held her breath. This was the realm of violence—she recognized it, she had been there before. The territory of murder.

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And having come to it again, there was nothing there to drive her mad. There was nothing there at all, except pity and timidity; a wistful look on the woman-farmer's freckled face, as if she were asking a favor, a little of a certain kind of irony or mockery to hide the look. Life had no curse left . . .

Patiently, Martha began again. "I can't remember when I didn't love him, and in all that time he never once asked me to marry him. He asked for—and received—other things. Oh yes, he is fond of me, I know, I know. But there was nothing to keep us apart; there was also nothing to bring us closer together, nothing to provoke him. It was always quite all right as it was. For him, I mean. And since I always supposed this might happen some day, I realize that when you told me I behaved disgracefully."

Not by the words but by the tone in which they were spoken, the emotion with which they were heard, Evelyn knew that she could not be frustrated or defeated, could not de-

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feat herself, even if she wanted to—could not want to. In the old days she had not known her rivals, unless that was one whom she had seen in the train, years after, coming away from the prison. This then was the rivalry of women, this, invincible love. Blessed are the hopeless and the guilty, for they . . .

Suddenly, to her amazement, she found herself rejoicing at the superiority of her life over her friend's: her friend's life in which there was every personal virtue, every lone self-sufficient virtue, somehow cut off, somehow condemned to renunciation; her own life grasping and surreptitious, without kindness, without wisdom, but wedded to an old destiny, putty in its lover's-hands, vapor in its arms. Old, old as they all were. Her thought ran on to her own ends: John—an indulged and optimistic man—could she make him as happy being what she was—but never more an old maid.

"I bore him to death," Martha said. "I

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know it. I have always bored him. You don't. That is your reward for what happened to you, for having been—all that. He will live to be an old man now and be young to the end. He wouldn't have but for you; I know him, and shall bless you every day of my life. And I don't need him, I assure you I don't need him. You do. I've always been too proud to need anybody—it serves me right."

Evelyn tried to protest once more, half-heartedly. "I deserve nothing. I am a spoiled woman. Let me give him up, make me, let me be good at last."

"Listen to me. It doesn't matter whether you deserve it or not. The rain falls on the just and the unjust alike. And if I took him away from you I shouldn't be keeping him, for I've never had him—and what would you do? I don't want to be responsible, I don't want to interfere with what is one of the advantages of your destiny, I refuse to. We can't all of us do what we like."

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Indeed, there was no choice at this parting of the ways. The unfortunate one of the two could not choose more misfortune, nor the fortunate one happiness. Evelyn could not expiate the evil she had done; Martha could not profit by her noble lifetime.

It was late and growing colder. The two aging women kissed one another. The scenery of their hearts was exactly like that of nature in the dusk—a violet hollow well-swept of clouds, the ashes of the year making the air strong, trodden autumnal paths leading infinitely apart and away. Their cheeks were very cold because they had been wet.

It was time to go indoors and make haste in the kitchen; whatever the circumstances, men had to be fed. John kept them waiting, and when at last they heard him in the lane, so much did Evelyn admire her friend that she was afraid and held her breath. He might have regretted the choice he had made between them; he might be coming to tell them that he had changed his mind.